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STUDENT THRESHOLDING INTO ACADEMIA: TEACHING WRITING TO THE BUDDING ACADEMICS' SOCIETY

Abstract

Lecturers are challenged when creating safe, dialogic-educative spaces for first-year students (freshman¹), where optimal teaching-learning of academic writing can be accomplished. This paper reports on a project aimed at creating a safe, dialogic-educative space in which first-year students may attain and practice academic writing skills providing students a threshold into Academia by fostering scholarliness. The significance of the mentor-teacher within this dialogic-educative space, employing process writing and scaffolding as teaching-learning techniques, is emphasized. Methodologically the study employed a hybrid epistemology namely constructivist hermeneutic phenomenology. As participant-observer, I documented this qualitative case study involving education students by making extensive notes, analyzing participants' written texts and through focus group interviews. The study suggests that creating a safe dialogic-educative space contributes towards academic scholarliness and generates a threshold for students into Academia. The results indicate that as participants' contributions were valued, they felt proficient and motivated in the academic literacy class. The process of producing a worthwhile academic text implored students to excel and envisage themselves as budding academics.

Background and rationale

No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world.
(John Keating in the film *Dead Poets' Society* (DPS))²

One of the problems I face as a teacher of academic literacy at the North-West University (Potchefstroom) is to create safe dialogic-educative spaces for the optimal teaching-learning of academic writing of first-year students. This paper reports on a project aimed at creating such safe spaces in which first-year students might not only attain and practice writing skills, but in which a liminal portal towards their future scholarliness may also be created; one in which the *paideia*³ (full-blown completeness) of their souls is allowed to emerge and permeate all in-

¹ A freshman, colloquially called *freshers*, is a term used for first year students in American universities.

² The extended metaphor used in this article is taken from the epic movie *Dead Poets' Society* and reflects poignant quotes from the English teacher John Keating to his students.

³ The term *paideia* (Greek: παιδεία) refers to the education of the ideal member of the polis. Originally, it incorporated both practical, subject-based schooling and a focus upon the socialization of individuals within the aristocratic order of the polis. The practical aspects of this education included subjects subsumed under the modern designation of the liberal arts (rhetoric, grammar and philosophy are examples), as well as scientific disciplines like arithmetic and medicine. An ideal and successful member of the polis would possess intellectual, moral and physical refinement.

class proceedings as overarching pedagogical purpose. I will refer to the teaching-learning strategies used as part of process writing to highlight the added value of the teaching of writing to these students (to whom I refer as the *Budding Academic' Society*). Upon reflection they seem to learn more than merely how to coin a phrase in academic voice. Some of them indeed prefer to incorporate into their various student activities what they have learnt to become the new generation of scholars and life-long learners (Potgieter, 2012: 89, Relles & Tierney, 2013: 494). The participants in this study seem to display an academic rigor due to at least three inter-related factors, namely:

- the inculcating of life skills such as self-regulation and self-actualisation;
- the re-affirmation of these life skills in the academic literacy classroom; and
- the embodiment of these life skills in a module that has deliberately been designated to assist them with their thresholding into Academia.

Demarcation of the problem

When you read, don't just consider what the author thinks, consider what you think. (John Keating in DPS)

The terms *teach* and *educate* both suggest more than simply producing first year students who can read academic texts and yield a written text that is academically sound. It suggests an intentional and complex interaction between a teacher and students within an environment that represents, essentially, a safe, dialogic-educative space. Ideally, the knowledge and skills taught and learnt should result in comprehensive products of reading and writing. It is, however, the acquisition of a critical and evaluative approach towards the content and intent of the module that increases the student's *paideia* of the soul. This refers in a broad sense to the shaping of a person's character, a well-rounded, educated individual who emulates the ideal of *humanitas* (Potgieter, 2013). *Paideia* in the context of this paper refers to the process of educating students into their true and genuine human nature as developing (budding) scholars, through the medium of academic literacy. A society (Academia) where skills and knowledge become the sole pursuit of lecturers and students disregards the critical development of the *Paideia of the soul* (Kazamias, 2013).

In reference to teaching academic writing to the *Budding Academic' Society* I will reflect on the following three interrelated problems:

- Does the writing programme of academic literacy proclaim to accomplish more than merely to teach knowledge and skills (more than a mere "sitting by Nelly-approach")?
- Should students be educated in academic literacy towards the goal of *humanitas* or should the *techné* (the skills and knowledge) of their writing activities remain the be all and end all of their training?
- What is the role of the mentor-teacher in the process of teaching-learning of the budding academics?

It is my contention that the mentor-teacher holds the key to unlocking the *paideia* of their students' souls. My approach in this paper is, therefore, to offer a reflection on a case study of first-year students as empirical basis for understanding the influence and life-long learning that safe dialogic-educative spaces provide

towards the transfer of life skills to adult life and their eventual inculcation into the world of work – a pedagogic and learning process that I wish to refer to as thresholding (Gourlay, 2009: 181).

Methodology and teaching-learning approach

Constantly look at life from a different perspective. (John Keating in DPS)

I taught the Budding Academics' Society academic literacy during their first year of study. My teaching-learning methodology was based on the creation of safe yet inviting dialogical-educative spaces where students who find themselves on the threshold of Academia could acquire the knowledge and skills to become proficient readers and writers and where they are also allowed the opportunity to develop their "moral/ethical character" towards their full-blown completeness as *paideia of the soul*. From the entire group interviewed in their first year I report on three representative participants to provide the findings for this particular case study.

Dialogue is a tool that is used extensively in education as a means of pedagogical intervention. According to Rule (2004: 1) dialogic space can be defined as a cognitive and socio-conventional space where role-players are able to mediate within a non-threatening environment. My paper seeks to address the fundamental realities of educative dialogue as they are usually operationalized in the academic literacy classroom.

Within this dialogical-educative safe classroom environment I specifically employed scaffolding and process writing as teaching methods for introducing, instilling and practicing thinking, listening, reading and particularly writing skills. I started by providing the students with discursive experiences first and then following these experiences with structure and format. Many educators (Schlechty, 2002; Armstrong, 1998; Wolfe, 2007) acknowledge the fact that students should rather be engaged on an instinctive, intuitive level with ideas than merely absorbing facts and skills. The educator has to connect assignments to the real, lived world and experiences of the students in a meaningful and practical way. The safe dialogic-educative space inspires learning that is exciting, experiential and active while relevant, authentic and academically sound (Wolfe, 2007).

Jerome Bruner, one of Vygotsky's followers, defines scaffolding (as referred to previously) as the fostering of higher levels of development by deepening the student's skills and understanding at the particular intellectual niveau where you as an educator meets him or her (Bruner, 2006; Harris & Hodges, 1996). This process of scaffolding writing and rewriting implies the gradual withdrawal of lecturer support during the course of a semester, thus transferring autonomy to the student as academic writer. As integral part of scaffolding is reflection of the student on his own writing and that of other students as critical readers. This creates a store of meta-language as students discuss their topics, academic language, writing skills and writing conventions with the lecturer and fellow students. The content of these discussions essentially represents the content for reflecting on the past, promulgating intellectual enquiry and following a pedagogy of curiosity that, in turn, provides rich opportunities for experiencing authentic work, including experiences concerning the mystery about life. As such, it does not merely pertain to subject matter, *per se* (Potgieter, 2013).

To be able to afford the students the space to transcend their academic boundaries the teacher should become a mentor to them in order to guide them across the threshold or liminal position of their academic careers (Gourlay, 2009: 183). To achieve this goal the mentor creates a dialogical-educative safe space where students will want to venture into the unknown territory of Academia. Here they should feel free to participate in activities, take part in dialogue and ask for assistance, without fear of being ridiculed by their peers and/or lecturers.

It should be the aim of education (and therefore academic literacy) to break the traditional mould of monologuing (i.e. the traditional “sage on the stage” model) where the educator speaks and where the learner sits quietly absorbing his / her wisdom (Alexander, 2005: 3-4). The nature of the module academic literacy is essentially geared towards breaking monologism and to promote academic and subsequent scientific dialogue by cultivating a secure atmosphere where budding academics and their mentoring lecturer may meet.

First and subsequent meetings of the Budding Academics’ Society (BAS)

Now we all have a great need for acceptance, but you must trust that your beliefs are unique, your own, even though others may think them odd or unpopular. (John Keating in DPS)

I provided a safe dialogic-educative space based on three guidelines: Firstly, I made sure that students were well-informed as far as my expectations of them were concerned. Secondly I clarified to students what they could expect from me. Thirdly I used scaffolding as overall teaching approach.

The writing was initialised with an open discussion and brainstorming by the students. I introduced the subject-specific discussion pertaining to the Faculty of Education Sciences and soon most students were taking part. The environment was non-threatening and students openly voiced their opinions even when they happened to disagree with the point of view of their fellow students. To structure the activity they formed discussion groups and organised the arguments most pertinent to the topic and feedback was given. These arguments provided the initial outline for an academic essay. This process would be used throughout the semester when they had to do written assignments.

Constructing the reflective personal narratives

If you listen real close, you can hear them whisper their legacy to you. Go on, lean in. Listen, you hear it? - Carpe - hear it? – Carpe, Carpe Diem! Seize the day, Boys! Make your lives extraordinary! (John Keating in DPS)

I report on three representative personal narratives from the 52 students interviewed initially during the first phase of the research as part of a pilot study to reflect on the three questions set at the beginning of this paper.

Mr T⁴ is an English first language speaker with Hindi as alternative home language. Ms N comes from a single parent family with English as home language, while Mr F is an IsiXhosa home language speaker who has been educated in

⁴ I used pseudonyms to refer to the students.

English. I saw them occasionally on campus after their stint in the academic literacy class and sometimes they would come to ask for assistance or would reflect on a particular academic event during their second and third year studies. All of them fared well academically had achieved leadership positions in their respective residences or in faculty and displayed a particular sense of social justice.

During a focus group interview in their third year of study (2013) I asked them to reflect on the nature and content of the academic literacy module. I particularly wanted to know whether they were still using some of the knowledge and skills they had acquired during their studies. Their answers to the questions were insightful as it pertained more to their growth as students and human beings, than to the mere acquisition of skills. As participant-observer I was able to interpret hermeneutically the construction of their lived experiences (Merriam, 2009: 213).

Ms N remembered clearly the first time they met me in class. She recalled that I had shown them an excerpt of the film *DPS* where the teacher reflected on his students' writing but also on their approach to life:

Boys, you must strive to find your own voice. Because the longer you wait to begin, the less likely you are to find it at all. Don't be resigned to that. Break out! (John Keating in *DPS*)

She believed that this quote she had written down in her diary on that particular day in August had "inspired me (her) to find my own voice in my academic writing."

I don't want to write like a paint-by-numbers colouring book. I want to use my own academic language... (Ms N)

In the academic literacy classroom students discussed themes such as professionalism, mentoring and social bias. Ms N remembered that sometimes heated discussions ensued but they always felt secure in expressing their opinions (no matter how radically different than that of other students) as long as they were academically sound. She now wanted to inspire the learners she taught with her attitude regarding education. Learners were, therefore, allowed to express themselves. This enhanced the English and Life Studies lessons she taught. Ms N narrated that she always found insight regarding the themes that were discussed during the contact sessions by listening carefully to the views expressed by other students even though they very often differed from her perspective.

Mr T commented that he had become more socially aware after the thematic discussions and assignments as he "heard the stories behind the opinions" made by his fellow-students. He stated that he often continued discussions in the residence about themes that we had discussed in class or searched the internet to see what had been written about them. A pertinent comment by Mr T underscores this sentiment:

*I know that students sometimes shy away from "deep" discussions but we should speak about important things. We are teachers and you said we were "budding scholars"! That we had to think and make a difference, like Mr Keating in *DPS*. We have to think. Soon we will be teachers and we have to teach the younger children to think...we have to do it first.*

He found the teaching-learning environment of the academic literacy class to be an environment that was non-threatening, yet challenging; it built students' confidence and encouraged discussion. He also remembered that I, as the mentor-teacher, always expected and applauded self-discipline and self-confidence. As a result, he wanted to be a mentor to other students and he subsequently became actively involved in the governance structures of his residence.

The mentor should allow students to express criticism about academic authors' work and in a dialogical-educative safe space, this becomes possible. As long as a relevant, logical and academically sound point of view is stated and supported with sources substantiating the argument, a student should be encouraged to question the existing status quo. He stated that in some other modules he felt that he had to suppress his own ideas and views as the lecturers did not allow comments contrary to their views and often labelled him as rebellious.

Mr F responded with the following statement:

... I didn't think you could not agree with a professor! But now I know how to disagree. I must just prove it. I like that!

Conclusion

From these personal student-narratives it can be deduced that the teaching-learning strategies used in academic literacy and especially academic writing are geared towards more than a mere skills and knowledge acquisition. It becomes a thresholding opportunity for students to successfully move beyond the liminal position of the budding academics towards the goal of *humanitas* and *paideia of the soul* of the scholars-in-the-making. The mentor-teacher creates a safe dialogic-educative space where students may engage in the process of writing without fear of ridicule and where their efforts can be turned into texts.

The process of writing leads the student towards finding his / her own academic voice. Students should be inspired and encouraged to broaden their own *paideia of the soul* and to communicate their reflections on life in academic narratives.

The final act of the mentor is to move into the peripheral haziness on the horizon of Academia. As the student moves forward, the teacher-mentor moves into the background always ready to assist but acknowledging the voices of the *Budding Academics' Society*.

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